T-85

Dear Dave. Thanks for the Christmas card. But I think you realize that you could have saved yourself the price of a card by just writing "Merry Christmas" on a piece of paper, which as far as I am concerned would be just as good.

Yes, you may send me a book for my birthday. As for suggestions, I've never had a chance to read Conrad's Mirror of the Sea, but would like to. However, it may be that the book is not currently available.

I was delighted to hear that you recognized my self-portrait. That was the first time (except once some 25 years ago) that I've tried to portray a particular person. Of course it's much harder to draw a recognizable portrait of someone than it is to just invent a face.

No, I haven't tried to talk to any of the people around here about preserving the country — I figure it would be a waste of effort. In talking to someone like your old friend who complains about the broken eggs and wants the road paved — with someone like that I would use the simplest and most concrete arguments, avoiding all psychological or philosophical issues. Try this out on him: ~~First, po~~ (I don't know whether that is a state road or a county road or what — just for convenience let's assume it's a state road.) First, he can't expect the state to do him a personal favor and just pave his road — if they pave that road they have to pave all roads throughout the state that carry a similar amount of traffic. The reason they don't pave those roads now is because the highway dept. has only so much money. To get the money they either have to raise taxes or increase the tax base. Your friend won't want to raise taxes. As for increasing the tax base, that can only be done by bringing in more people and industry so that cities like San Antonio get bigger and worse. Well, wait. That argument leads into ramifications that are probably beyond

60131017 D UT Q736

60131017 D UI Q736

your friend's limited capacity to absorb abstractions. Probably it would be best to keep the argument simpler still: You can't "separate the good from the bad" because you can't have paved roads without having big cities too. Why? Because it would be impossibly expensive to pave all those roads with picks and shovels. To do it you need machinery. And you can't have machinery without those poor bastards slaving away on the assembly lines in Detroit and the steel mills in Pittsburg and so forth. The more roads you pave the more machinery you need, and the bigger the cities have to get.

Still, the best you can hope to do with someone like that, I think, is create enough confusion in his mind so that he stops whining for a paved road. Fact is that most people are animals. Except with issues that are of such immediate and obvious practical importance that they can't evade them (and sometimes even with such issues), what they think is what enables them to most easily avoid any psychological conflict. This applies to intellectuals and other supposedly "thinking" people as well as to the average man.

I doubt that the pigmies have any guilt, conscious or otherwise, about killing animals. Guilt is a conflict between what we're trained not to do and impulses that lead us to do it anyway. Apparently there is nothing in pygmy culture that leads them not to kill or inflict pain on animals. What the pygmies love and celebrate is their way of life, and they see no conflict between that and killing for meat; in fact, the hunting is an essential part of their way of life — they gotta eat. We tend to see a conflict there because we come from a world where there is a gross excess of people who even apart from hunting destroy the natural world through their very presence in such numbers. But to the pygmies — until very recently anyway — there's been no need for "conservation". The forest is full of animals; with the pygmies' primitive weapons and sparse population the question of exterminating

hm — is it pigmies or pygmies? I forget

the game never arises. The pygmy's problem is to fill his belly. The civilized man can afford to feel sorry for wild animals because he can ~~afford it~~ take his food for granted. Some psychologists claim that man is attracted to "death" as they call it. Certainly young men are attracted to action, violence, aggression, and that sort of thing. Note the amount of make-believe violence in the entertainment media — in spite of the fact that in our culture that sort of thing is considered bad and unwholesome and so forth. Since man has been a hunter for the last million years, it is possible that, like other predatory animals, he has some kind of a "killer instinct". It would thus seem that the pygmies are just acting like perfectly good predatory animals. Why should they feel sorry for their prey any more than a hawk, a fox, or a leopard does? On the other hand, when a modern "sport" goes out with a high-powered rifle, you have a different situation. Some obvious differences are: much less skill is required with a rifle than with primitive weapons; the "sport" does it for fun, not because he needs the meat; he is in a world where there are too many people and not enough wildlife, and a rifle makes it too easy to kill too many animals. Of course, the fish and game dept. will see to it that the animals don't get exterminated, but this entails "wildlife management" — manipulation of nature which to me is even worse than extermination. Beyond that, while the pygmy lives in the wilderness and belongs to it, the "sport" is an alien intruder whose presence is a kind of desecration. In a sense, the sport hunter is a masturbator: His hunting is not the "real thing" — it's not what hunting is for a primitive man — he is trying to satisfy an instinct in a debased and distorted way, just like when you rub your prick to crudely simulate what you really want, which is a love affair with a woman. Of course there's nothing wrong with jagging off to relieve yourself when you get horny — it's harmless. But — even apart from the question of depletion of wildlife — the presence of "sports" in the wilderness tends to spoil it for those who know better

6013101 7 D UI Q737

how to appreciate nature.

So, as I said, I see no reason why the pygmies should have any pity for the animals they kill — they gotta kill to eat anyway, so why make themselves uncomfortable by worrying about the animals' pain? On the other hand, I did share your (and the author's) adverse reaction to the account of the pygmies' callousness toward animals. For one thing — much as I hate to admit it — my feelings probably have been influenced by the attitudes prevalent in our society; for another thing — and this too is probably in some way related to the social background — I am more ready to put myself in the position of, and see things from the point of view of, another being, such as an animal; finally — and this does not derive from the social background — I see wild animals as "good guys", the ones who are on my side, in contrast to civilization and its forces (the bad guys), hence I tend to identify with the wild animals. Certainly I would be much less prone to have pity for a domestic animal than for a wild one. I kill rabbits and so forth because I need the meat, but (now more than formerly — youth tends to be callous) I always regret that something alive and beautiful has been turned into just a piece of meat. (Though when you're hungry enough for meat, you don't worry too much about that.)

If you wanted, you could perhaps justify the pygmies this way: The pygmy kills without compunction or pity in order to eat. The pygmy too has to die some day, but he isn't afraid of that. Perhaps he'll be killed some day by a leopard or a buffalo, but he doesn't whine about it or ask the leopard or buffalo to have mercy on him. He is an animal like the others in the forest and he shares the hardships and dangers with the other animals. He lives in an amoral world. But it's a free world and I would say a much wholesomer and fulfilling world than that of modern civilization. I do share your negative

60131017 D UI Q737

emotional reaction to the pygmies' ruthlessness, but I'm inclined to suspect that that reaction is perhaps a little decadent, and I don't see that anything would be improved much by the pygmy's vicariously sharing the sufferings of the animals he kills.

Later: This discussion (which I wish I could express more carefully and completely, but if I did it would take forever to finish this letter) can be carried further. I mentioned the fact that the pygmies' world is an amoral one and that such a world may be a wholesomer world than the moral one of civilization. Note that amorality does not exclude generous behavior toward others: human beings have impulses of love and loyalty to one another and these are animal impulses, not products of morality. By morality I mean feelings of guilt and shame that we are trained to associate with certain actions that our instinctive impulses would otherwise lead us to perform. Of course it's disagreeable to admit the extent to which we've been influenced by all that brainwashing — attitudes to which we are constantly exposed in school, in books, in the mass communications media, etc. I hate to admit it, but — as I believe I mentioned to you once before — I would be incapable of premeditatedly committing a serious crime, and the reason for this is simply that I am subject to the same trained-in inhibitions as most other people. I couldn't commit a serious crime cause I'd be scared to — quite apart from the fear of getting caught. On an intellectual level I don't believe in any moral code. To what extent is our aversion to the pygmies' ruthlessness simply the result of our having been brainwashed? Now the point I want to make is this: One of the principal justifications — or rather rationalizations — given for moral training is that it promotes human welfare — we are better off if we don't kill each other, steal from each other, etc. But what I would

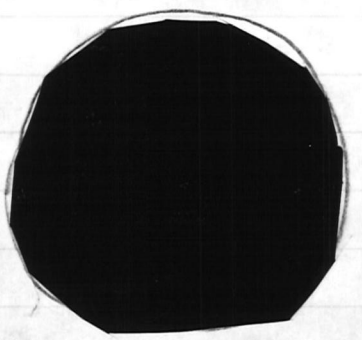
60131017 D UI Q738 FBI

argue is that a strongly developed morality and system of inhibitions exacts a psychological price that is too much to pay for the added physical security. We would lead more fulfilling lives with less trained-in inhibitions even at the price of considerably less physical security. People who are habituated from childhood to a relatively unsafe mode of existence — such as primitive savages — don't seem to mind it a bit. It doesn't make them feel insecure. As for the price of inhibitions, I've read in more than one place that there is an inverse relation between murder and suicide statistics. Countries that have a high murder rate tend to have a low suicide rate and countries with a low murder rate tend to have a high suicide rate. This seems to suggest that people who are too inhibited about expressing aggression pay a high psychological price — for every one who commits suicide there are probably a great many who are miserable but never quite get to the point of stringing themselves up. Primitives are probably not wholly free of morality, but they are undoubtedly far less clamped down by moral inhibitions than we are. One thing I've noticed in reading about very primitive peoples is that in many cases there seems to be a great deal of squabbling and quarrelling among them. This used to repel me, because like other people of our sort of background I've been trained to hold in the feelings that give rise to quarrelling. We have to be trained to do that because our machine-like society would function very poorly if workers got into a shouting match with the boss or their fellow-workers every time they got pissed off about something. Our society requires order above all else. But I don't see why

60131017 D UI Q738

primitive societies should be regarded as worse than ours because of their quarrelsomeness. Unquestionably the resentments and jealousies are present in our society — the only difference is that they are not usually expressed openly. They come out as snide remarks made behind someone's back or in other pettiness, or (perhaps worse) they are just held in, where they fester. Probably the primitives do better to openly express their annoyances and resentments. Well, I could go on forever pursuing the ramifications of this — I could bring in personal loyalty among the Somalis, political corruption in Latin America ... but I guess I've rambled on long enough. Also, I did a sloppy job of expressing all this, but I don't want to spend forever writing this letter, so fuck it.*

When I referred to literary criticism as a "parasitic" art form I was just being cute. I didn't use the word with denigratory intention. I didn't assume that the ultimate touchstone for a literary interpretation was the conscious intention of the author — or that there was any touchstone at all. I mentioned intentions because literary critics commonly claim to be divining the intentions of the author, and moreover, if I remember correctly, you made your comments in terms of what Quiroga "meant" by the story, didn't you? So I



*This hole → is for your convenience in fucking it. Notice how flatteringly large I've made the hole.

60131017 D UI Q739

wanted to point out that any opinion as to his intentions was necessarily conjectural. You seem to vaguely suggest some kind of mystical criterion to which literary criticism is responsive. Supposing we grant the existence of some such thing — how do you know, apart from mere conjecture, that a work of criticism is in fact responsive to this supposed criterion? I would argue that (aside from some cases where it actually is possible to divine the author's intention) a literary interpretation is essentially arbitrary — the only criterion to which it is actually responsive is whether it evokes from us a suitable emotional response.

My "discovery" as you were kind enough to call it of a seeming connection between Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Dr. Livingstone was a discovery in the personal sense, but I think it unlikely that I discovered anything not known to professional scholars. The fact is that it is practically impossible for an amateur to discover anything new in today's world, except by chance in rare cases, because almost every conceivable subject that is of natural interest to human beings has been thoroughly worked over by professional scholars. Almost anything an amateur might do or discover will usually be re-discovery of what is already known to the professionals. To do anything new, as a general rule you'd have to first become a semi-professional yourself by thoroughly researching the field to find out just what is already known and at what point you can jump off into the unknown. The trouble is that by the time you did all the research I think in most cases you'd have to conclude that all the really interesting questions have been so thoroughly worked

60131017 D UI Q739

over that to do anything new you'd have to apply yourself to narrowly technical questions of no interest to anyone but specialists. That was one of the several reasons why I quit mathematics. As a graduate student I was ambitious; repeatedly, questions occurred to me that I thought would not have been investigated. After solving the problems I tracked them down in the literature, and, without a single exception, the problems turned out to have been already solved, and in the majority of cases they had been solved decades before. I found that in the current literature mathematicians were devoting themselves to more and more narrowly technical questions that were of no possible interest except that they provided problems for mathematicians to exercise their skill on. There are some exceptions to this, of course, but in general the situation is as I have described it, in mathematics and I think in most other scholarly fields.

Question of too many people. With 3 billion people (or whatever the number is) in the world it seems impossible to have a new idea or follow a train of thought that isn't being followed simultaneously by someone else. Even outside the scholarly fields this parallelism of ideas is often striking. Remember that "generic Christmas card" I sent a few years ago? Well, a couple of years later in a drugstore or some such place, on a stand offering gag postcards, I saw a "generic postcard" practically identical to my thing. Several times I have encountered in comic strips or other mass media jokes that I had previously thought of myself. You'll recall how pleased I was when I encountered Jacques Ellul's book The Technological

6013101 31017 D UI Q740

society because his thinking ran so close to my own. I was glad to find the book, but it was another instance of the parallelism of ideas, of the near impossibility of thinking of anything new in such a crowded world. Out of all those 3 billion people, I wouldn't consider it at all surprising if, say, half a dozen or so were to write to someone this month complaining about the fact that with 3 billion people in the world it is almost impossible to have an idea or follow a train of thought without someone else thinking the same thing either previously or at the same time ...*

Yossa wrote: "In a footnote to your last letter, you seemed to express disappointment that I failed to perform the favor you asked of me." I was less disappointed by the fact that you didn't do the favor than by the fact that you talked (wrote, I should say) as if you were going to do something about it and then just let it slide indefinitely. You remember a few years ago when I suggested the possibility of peddling Ceanothus tea to health-food stores and places like that? Well, you wrote back expressing enthusiasm for the idea and you said you thought it was promising and so forth, but when it came to actually doing something about it you became progressively less enthusiastic and in the end all you did was peddle the stuff to a few acquaintances as a

*Come to think of it, shortly after I quit mathematics, partly because it often took more effort to discover whether a problem was new than it did to actually solve the problem itself, I read in a magazine article the statement that "One of the principal problems of research today is to find out what is already known so as to avoid duplicating the results of other workers", or words to that effect. Exactly echoing my own thoughts.

60131017 D UI 0740

favor to me because I needed money — an attitude which I can't help seeing as rather condescending. Later you'll remember I suggested the possibility of trying to buy a plot of land in S. America or Canada, and at first you seemed strongly interested — and interested for your own sake as well as mine. Later your interest faded and you claimed you only got involved in it as a favor to me — which was no doubt true in the later stages of the affair. Now again you talked as if you were going to get that information for me and again you just let it slide. You probably would have just let it slide until you forgot about it if I hadn't mentioned it again. Now I want to emphasize that I don't consider you in any way obligated to participate in any projects I might suggest or to do me any favors. But you'll understand that I find it rather tiresome that you make promising noises and then do nothing. I'm aware of your little problem about procrastination and so forth, but I must say I would find it more agreeable if you would refrain from speaking in promising terms unless, by some chance, you actually had a serious intention of carrying something through. But it's not important - I'm not seriously annoyed or anything.

Please forgive me for offering unasked-for advice, but it does seem to me that your tendency to drop projects like this may be simply the result of a negative attitude about the possibility of success. Carrying one or two things through successfully might result in a more encouraged attitude on your part thereafter. But I apologize for putting my nose into what is none of my business.

When I said that you didn't owe me anything, I didn't mean to put our relations on a

60131017 D UI Q741

"commercial" basis. I merely wanted to make it clear that I wasn't demanding anything, and that I didn't consider that I had a right to demand anything or that you were in any way obligated.

By the way, I asked you, if you'll recall, whether the 4 college papers you'd seen were from small colleges or from sizable universities. The fact that you never answered the question was what made me think you might be feeling a little uncomfortable about the matter. Anyway, I'd like to repeat the question now and ask furthermore, if you happen to remember:

(1) What colleges were the papers from?
(2) Names of papers?
(3) Which, if any, had a classified ad section?

I got the addresses of 3 university papers from a reference book in the library, but the book didn't give much information about them. I wrote to them, and apparently 2 of the 3 have no classified ad section. The third did have a classified ad section, and I got a copy of the paper, but there were no ads there for translations. So I don't know whether or not it's worthwhile to gamble a few bucks on placing an ad there. I know that when I was in school I used to see classified ads for translations in the college papers and also in the Saturday Review, and I don't see why there would be any less market for translations today than 20 years ago, but who knows? It would certainly be a convenient way for me to make some money.

For the last couple of years you seem to have been much more communicative in your letters than you used to be. Of course I don't care for all your letters, but some of them I find quite interesting, and enjoyable to read. That your last letter was one of the more interesting ones you can deduce from the length of the reply I've written to it. —Ted

P.S. Never did get any answer from Joel. Guess he wasn't interested. Too bad. Actually, I was less interested in the question itself than in opening an exchange with him about the Hebrew language (he knows Hebrew, doesn't he?), Jewish history, and so forth, which would have been interesting.

60131017 D UI 0741